

George A. Smathers

United States Senator from Florida, 1951-1969

Interview #5: The Senate in Committee

(Tuesday, September 12, 1989)

Interviewed by Donald A. Ritchie



Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, ca. 1954.

From left to right: Senators Frank Barrett, Thomas Kuchel, Henry Dworshak, Arthur Watkins, George Malone, Guy Cordon, Eugene Millikin, Hugh Butler, James Murray, Clinton Anderson, Russell Long, George Smathers, Earle Clements, Henry Jackson, and Price Daniel.

Senate Historical Office

Ritchie: Today I thought we could talk about some of the committees you served on in the Senate, and I wanted to start by asking: as a senator, how much time do you spend in committees?

Smathers: I think the committee is really the most important assignment that a senator has, and it doesn't take a senator long to realize that it's the committee that he serves on that gives him stature and importance. And I think that most senators have in their mind that they would like to have at least one committee that has a lot to do with their state. That's why you see so often fellows who come from states where there are big military establishments, they love to be on the Armed Services Committee, so that they can be certain that the navy base or the air base or whatever it is that is in their state, or in their district if they are a congressman, that it stays there, it's not removed. So that's a factor which is important.

I think there are other factors, for instance the late [Claude Pepper](#), he wanted a district when he ran in 1962 and got elected to the Congress, he came from a district which was made up almost exclusively of elderly, retired people. So right away he went on the Aging Committee, which was the smart thing to do. And in time he became the head of it. His whole career was pretty much patterned after the makeup of his constituency, and I think that's true even for senators. In Florida you have such a diverse makeup of the state population that you go from the elderly people that we just talked about in Claude's district to the Cubans, of which there are many, who are in [Danny Fascell](#)'s district--that's why as chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House he likes that job very much, and it's very helpful to him with his constituency, which is like fifty percent Cuban, or Hispanic. Charlie Bennett up in the northern end of the state, Charlie's on the Armed Services Committee. He has been for golly I don't know how many years, but let's say thirty years. Charlie has the biggest military bases in the state. He has the Jacksonville Naval Air Station, which is the biggest naval air station, with the exception of Pensacola, it's the biggest in our state and it's one of the biggest in the country. He also has a big army base there in his district. He likes that sort of thing.

So your question was what committees are the most important, and what were the committee assignments I had. Well, when I first went to the Congress I was lucky enough to become a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, which was a very, very desirable committee. When I first moved from the House to the Senate, they gave me a very unimportant committee, which nobody really wanted to be on in those days, which was the Post Office and Civil Service

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Committee. The other committee which they put me on was the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, which was actually a very good committee, and which I enjoyed very much serving on. Later I became the chairman of the Aviation Subcommittee of the Commerce Committee, and then at a later date I was chairman of the Ground Transportation Subcommittee of the Commerce Committee, being in charge of barges and railroads and trucks. So I got to know the trucking industry rather well, I got to know the railroad industry very well, I got to know the other ground transportation industries, because I was the guy that sat listening to all their problems and dealt with them as they had to deal with the Interstate Commerce Commission and with the CAB and with all the other governmental agencies. That was a very helpful committee for me.

I had aspired always to be on the Finance and Taxation Committee, because that was the committee which not only had as its principle jurisdiction the passage and consideration of all tax measures, income tax, all kinds of taxes, domestic, foreign tax, whatever it was it had to go before the Finance and Taxation Committee. I finally got on that committee. I think [Lyndon](#) arranged for me to be on it. When on it I went on right behind [Russell Long](#). Russell Long subsequently

became chairman of that committee because he was senior to me in going on the committee. But that was the main committee which I served on, and which I enjoyed mostly in the last twelve years that I was in the Senate. Because I did like the discussion of economic matters, and of taxes, and whether or not they were conducive to a growing and greater economy, or whether or not they were not just stabilizing but had some disadvantageous attributes. But then all the people in big business, they all come to see you because they're all very concerned about their taxes. So you get invited to the Business Council, which is made up of all the important men who are CEOs, chief executive officers of the various big corporations of the country. Chamber of Commerce people want you to come and make speeches to them about what's going to happen to taxes and what the economy is going to look like, and so on. Good committee. I very much enjoyed it.

I also enjoyed the Commerce Committee--interesting enough how did I get off the Commerce Committee? One way or another after I had been there as long as I had I should have been able to become chairman of one of those committees. The reason that I was unable to become chairman of the Finance and Taxation Committee is that I did not get on that committee as quickly as I would have liked, and that Russell Long, who is my dearest and closest friend, and I'm happy to report still is, spent the weekend with me just last weekend, still one of my intimate close friends. He was two years younger than me in point of age, but he was a year and a half older than me in terms of service on the committee. So I was always behind Russell. And I could see that I could never become chairman. I could have been chairman of the Commerce Committee had I stayed on it, because I went on it before [John] [Pastore](#) went on it, but Pastore and I were of the same vintage, I think he probably came to the Senate the same year I did. He had been governor of Rhode Island, or maybe he was behind me, I think he was behind me, but in any event, I was very

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senior on that committee and should have been chairman. And Russell Long was on the Commerce Committee too.



U.S. Senate Historical Office
Senator Russell Long
Senate Historical Office

What happened to me was that after [Kennedy](#) got to be president, he called me and said, "Old pal, I want you to do me a favor," always giving you the "old pal, I'm counting on you." "I want you to give up one of your committees and go on the Foreign Relations Committee, because I need some hawks on the committee. We've got too many pacifists on the committee." [Wayne Morse](#) and [Bill Fulbright](#) and [Frank Church](#), these guys, they were just for giving away everything in the view of Kennedy and me and others. They had their beliefs and we had our beliefs, and I was a sort of a militarist and a strong defense man, and these people were always seeking ways to resolve problems through peaceful methods, which is not wrong, but anyway there are more that are more militant than others, and I was one of the more militant. Kennedy talked me into giving up my position on the Commerce Committee and moving to the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate, which automatically caused me to give up my seniority on the Commerce Committee and have to move and start at the bottom of the ladder on the Foreign Relations Committee, but that's what I did for my friend Jack Kennedy. And he talked Russell Long into doing the same thing.

So Russell and I were on the same two committees, on the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate as well as the Finance and Taxation Committee. The problem was that Russell could see that eventually when [Bob Kerr](#) retired and when [Harry Byrd](#) retired, that he Russell Long would be the chairman. And I could see that I could never be chairman, because Russell was in good health and two years younger than me. That was one of the reasons that made me, as I have said previously, decide to retire from the Senate, because I could have stayed there for many, many years. If I had stayed there until today, for example, rather than [Lloyd Bentsen](#) being chairman I would be chairman. But that depended upon Russell Long resigning, and Russell Long stayed there, and Russell's in good shape today. He visited me over this past weekend and he was in great shape. I didn't know he was going to retire, and he didn't either in those days. He thought he would stay there forever, which he could have, because in Louisiana he was a surefire reelected guy anytime he wanted to run. Had I known that he was going to retire, maybe I would have ventured to stay on and become chairman, in place of Lloyd Bentsen, however at the time it looked like Russell was going to stay. And he told me, he had no intention whatever of retiring from the Senate.

So that's when I decided: I can't be chairman of the Finance Committee. I can't be chairman of the Commerce Committee, I've given that up. I never would be chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, I'm behind everybody on that committee--I was about the tenth ranking fellow. So there I was. And I had fallen out with Lyndon Johnson's leadership, so there was just really no place for me to go, other than just to be there and be another senator, which I could have been, and very happily I guess. I could have gone back into the leadership had I so chosen, I guess. I'm the guy who put [Bob Byrd](#) in, in a way,

I started him on the road to leadership. But I could have done that for myself. But there was that combination of things.

I got off the point here a little bit. Your question was about the committees, I think the Finance and Taxation Committee is the most desirable committee in the United States Senate. It has an overview of all economic matters, and it has sole jurisdiction to pass tax legislation, lower and raise taxes. In addition it has all the jurisdiction with respect to trade. All trade agreements with other nations have to come through the Finance and Taxation Committee. I was very helpful in working out a lot of agreements between the United States and the Latin American countries on sugar. I was the guy who helped them get good sugar quotas, even against sugar growers of Louisiana and sugar growers of Florida, and the beet sugar growers of Iowa and the midwest. I was always very partial to creating, and I still believe that the future trade for the United States is north-south more than east-west, more than our trading with Europe. I think we are going to have difficulty when the European Common Market finally has no barriers amongst themselves, but only a big barrier around them as opposed to the United States, the Soviet Union and Japan. I think that at that point in time we are going to see much of the trade we have with Europe diminish, and they'll be trading more with each other and protecting each other. We're going to wish at that point that we had done more for Latin American trade and Canadian trade, the north-south trade rather than the east-west trade.

The Finance Committee has all of that jurisdiction, so I liked that committee, needless to say. The Appropriations Committee is of course a tremendously important committee because no money is appropriated for any government projects, or any of the Defense Department activities, without the approval of the Appropriations Committee. The guy who controls the purse string in a way, obviously he's a tremendously important fellow. Bob Byrd, one of the reasons why he was willing to give up his leadership of the Senate, was because he could swap it for the chairmanship of the Appropriations Committee. It's not quite as hard work as being majority leader. But it's a tremendously important committee. There are other good committees, the Judiciary Committee, all of them are good. I briefly was on the Judiciary Committee, I forget for what reason I got on it, and what reason I got off it, but I was on it I think for maybe one term, I've forgotten just why.

Ritchie: You resigned from Foreign Relations and you went onto Judiciary.

Smathers: Oh, did I? I guess that's when I was going to retire from the Senate, and I thought I'd better get my thinking straightened out. Kennedy had passed away and Johnson was in, so I thought I'd better get back to some legal things, because I'm going to have to go back into private life where I'm a lawyer and where I will appear before judges, and the judges will hopefully know me and I'll be able to know them, and maybe that will get me in a better tune. That was studied in the thought that I was going to retire, and I would be a lawyer, and I might as well go on the Judiciary Committee and begin to get once

again familiar with the language of the law, the legal language, and the judicial codes and that sort of thing.

But committees are the things which make the senator. That's the road you have to go, unless you're the leadership. Either its the leadership role or its your committee work which makes you a distinguished or an undistinguished senator.

Ritchie: Russell Long once said that he went on Foreign Relations and Finance and found that they were a very poor mix of committees. I was never quite certain what he meant by that, and I wondered if you found the same situation?

Smathers: Well, he went on the Foreign Relations Committee because he was asked to go, just like I was. Now I wanted to be on the Foreign Affairs Committee when I was in the House, but I was very happy with the committee which I was on, because as a matter of fact I was doing more foreign relations work as a member of the Commerce Committee because [Warren] [Magnuson](#) who was then chairman of the Commerce Committee, he appointed me as the chairman of the Foreign Trade Subcommittee. As a matter of fact, I think I made two or three trips into South America as a member of the Commerce Committee, promoting trade and commerce, which was the same thing as foreign relations as far as I was concerned.

Foreign Relations is a fascinating committee, but the truth of the matter is that under the constitution the president is supposed to be the almost sole leader, that's not the right word, but its the presidency which has the jurisdiction and the power to deal with foreign countries, make treaties and that sort of thing. Originally, the only power that the Senate had was to approve of treaties, that was it. The president did it all. And I think that's the way it should be, very frankly, and I think one of the sad things we see today is no matter who's the president I think that the Congress has cut into his authority so much that it's very difficult for the president, and the secretary of state's people to run the foreign affairs of the country. A wonderful illustration of that, it's not a happy illustration, but it's an illustration, is the Nicaraguan deal today. Ronald Reagan and his State Department wanted to go one route, and the members of Congress wanted to go another route, and they were mostly Democrats. They were playing a lot of politics--not that Ronald Reagan didn't play a lot of politics himself, but at least he did have constitutionally the authority to do what he was trying to do. The Congressman who introduced--I can't recall his name, I know him very well, from Massachusetts.

Ritchie: [Boland](#).

Smathers: Eddie Boland introduced that amendment which would not let the administration do what they wanted to do with respect to the treatment of the

Contra forces in Nicaragua, but it in effect said that you may say that you are going to do it, but you can't do it because we won't give you any money to

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do it. So the effect was to totally negate the authority and the power of the presidency to run foreign affairs. I think that's happening more and more today.

That brings me back to your question. The Foreign Relations Committee, and the Foreign Affairs Committee, of the House and Senate, were mostly debating societies, and should have been. Being on the committee you had all the information, but you were really not supposed to be running the foreign affairs of the country. That's supposed to be run by the executive branch of government. However, the Congress has succeeded by virtue of its power to control the purse, control the money, to so restrict the activities of the executive branch that the executive branch really can't do much of anything without getting the approval of the Congress. Whereas originally it was intended that the only time the Congress would ever appear would be to declare war, yes, surely, but the president would have to be the one who recommended it. They couldn't declare war without the president asking them to declare war. And the only other thing was that they approved treaties. But through the power of the press they slowly began to get control of the foreign affairs of the nation. That was, I think, a misadventure. It was then, and it is today.

The Foreign Relations Committee is a very important committee, but I heard Kennedy one time say something about it being mostly an intellectual debating society rather than an actual administrative, constructive committee which actually can do things. They can do it in a negative way. It's a great committee, and I thoroughly enjoyed being on it, but it wasn't exciting for me at all. It wasn't as exciting to me as was the Finance and Taxation Committee, which I still say is the best committee there. Then there's the Judiciary Committee, the Armed Services Committee, the other administrative committees, they're all important, but I was fortunate to be able to serve on--except for the Appropriations Committee--I think I was on the two most important committees.

Ritchie: What was your impression of Senator Fulbright as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee?

Smathers: Fulbright is one of the genuine intellectuals that I really know. He can be the most obstinate, obdurate, difficult fellow that you've ever seen. But on the other hand he was one hundred percent sincere. He is a most admirable fellow. He played less politics than most any other senator I ever knew. He had gone to Oxford, after he had graduated from the University of Arkansas, and [Truman](#) called him an "over-educated son of a bitch." But Bill Fulbright was one of the truly independent thinkers that we had during the days that I was in the United States Senate. Fulbright, he was Fulbright. He did what he conscientiously

believed, which we all did, but he had sound reasons in his own mind for doing the things that he wanted to do. Being a very well-educated person he was essentially a pacifist. By that I don't mean he was weak, but because he was so cerebral, and so intellectual, he could not understand why people could not sit down and work out their problems, even though it may be the Chinese versus the Soviet Union, even though it might be

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the United States versus Stalin and the Kremlin, he still couldn't understand why reasonable people could not but then would not sit down and resolve their problems. Therefore he was opposed to most any type of military action.

He was the first fellow, of course, who ever really spoke up opposing the Vietnam war. He voted against the Tonkin Resolution, which was the big vote that we had in the Senate, which actually got us committed to further enlargement of our activities in Vietnam. Fulbright was the one fellow more so than anybody else who spoke against that at the time, when it was rather unpopular to do that. But Fulbright is a genuine intellectual. He believes--and I believe it somewhat too, but not to the extent that he did--that if you could get people to start talking to each other you could resolve all problems. That's what his whole ambition and his whole career was all about, as far as I could see. He developed the Fulbright Scholarship program, which was a student exchange program with all the people in Europe, and in South America, he thoroughly believed in that.

I think he got that from his own personal experience when he graduated from the University of Arkansas and got an opportunity to become a Rhodes Scholar, studied at Cambridge, traveled over Europe, spent many of his impressionable, youthful years in Europe. He saw that these people were really just like other people just like we were, they liked to eat, they liked to sleep, they liked to wear clothes, they liked to have their independence. He saw that, as anybody does who travels to these countries. You start talking to people on the street and except for the language barrier, most places, certainly in Europe, they're just like we are. They just speak a different language. But they want exactly the same things that we want. They'd like to eat three good meals a day, they'd like to have a little vacation time, they'd like to have a little fun. Their ambitions in life are pretty much like ours. In other words, the human race is pretty much the same, even though we're some different colors in some places, and we're different stature, and that sort of thing. But Fulbright appreciated that more so than anybody else. And he firmly fought for that philosophy throughout his whole career.



Senator James William Fulbright
Senate Historical Office

You ask me what kind of a chairman was he? I got mad at him as chairman because he cut me off when I was trying to interview Castro, wouldn't let me talk. When Castro came in he was adored by the press and everybody else, but I knew that he was bad and I tried to point that out to people, for which I got severely criticized by the *Miami Herald* and the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* and all the other papers. They took me to task for being a horrible reactionary. I sat with the committee, I was the last man to get a chance to ask questions, I wasn't on the committee at that time, I got permission from Fulbright to do it, because I wanted to ask Castro these questions. After [Frank Lausche](#) got through--Lausche took forever, Wayne Morse took forever, talking to him. But Fulbright cut me off.

Castro said he had to go, he was speaking to the National Press Club at twelve o'clock, and it got to be about five minutes of twelve and I said, "Well,

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Mr. Chairman, let me just ask two or three questions. Fidel Castro, when are you going to have an election? When are the people of Cuba going to have an opportunity to vote for who should be their leader rather than have somebody like you take over?" And he said, "They would reelect me, overwhelmingly." I said: "Well, in that case, why are you afraid to set a date?" He said, "I'm not going to answer that question." And about that time, Fulbright said, "Well, the time's all up. The meeting is adjourned. Mr. Castro has to be at the Press Club at twelve thirty. So he adjourned the meeting and I got no answer. I was always a little unhappy with Fulbright about cutting me off and never getting an answer from Fidel. Which would not have been an answer anyway, he would not have given it, he would have avoided it, but at least I would have put him on the spot.

But I liked Fulbright, because Fulbright is just what he is. There is no pretense about Bill Fulbright. He is an honorable, smart, dedicated, wonderful guy.

Ritchie: He worked fairly well with Johnson when they were both in the Senate.

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Smathers: Yes.

Ritchie: But not when Johnson went to the White House. What happened?

Smathers: What happened was that Johnson was caught up in the war. Fulbright had already made his position that he was against the war in Vietnam. Fulbright was that way before anybody else talked about it, Fulbright had already made several speeches on the floor that it was a mistake ever to get into it. We shouldn't do it, and so on. But then Johnson got caught up with the military, which I know from personal experience. I have been there in the Oval Office, with Johnson, with [Humphrey](#), with [Mansfield](#), with the Republican leadership, not [Knowland](#).

Ritchie: Dirksen.

Smathers: Everett Dirksen. And had General Westmoreland and others come before us. We weren't a committee, Johnson just called the leadership group over there. Westmoreland and all the other generals would say: If you'll just give us two more divisions. If you'll just allow us to use ten more air groups. If you'll just turn us loose and let us bomb these places, and do what we have to do, we can win the war. They would say that meeting after meeting. I was at, let's say at least six different meeting, and others attended maybe more, where the military would tell Johnson that. "We can win this." And Johnson would say, "I don't want to be the first president of the United States to ever lose a war. I don't want to do that. I want you sons of bitches to win it. Now what do we have to do it win it?" Then he would get pumped up by guys like [Goldwater](#) to do more.

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But I will say this in Johnson's defense, he was told not once but maybe a hundred different times that with the amount of troops that we kept putting in there, that they were finally going to win. What happened was every time we put in more the Chinese doubled it. They just put in more, and they had a hell of a lot more troops than we had, or than we wanted to expend, so finally it became evident that you couldn't beat China in a manpower type thing unless you're willing to drop the atomic bomb, unless you're willing to do something really very, very drastic. Johnson didn't want to do that, and I don't think any of the rest of us did. That's when we began to sort of figure out a way to lose the war, to get out of it. [Nixon](#) came along and he saw the wisdom of quitting it real quickly, and to his credit he finally had enough courage and enough good sense to finally call it off. As old [George] [Aiken](#) of Vermont said, the thing to do is to pull out and say we've won the war, claim victory, that's what sort of happened.

That whole war, of course, destroyed Johnson. The reason Johnson didn't run again was I think mainly because of that. Johnson was such a proud and vain fellow he could not have accepted the fact that the American public would not

have voted for him again for president. It was just too much. He couldn't have stood it, and he knew he couldn't have stood it. He couldn't risk running again. That's when he made that sudden announcement: I will not be a candidate. That's what did it.

I've got a good friend named Clark Clifford, I really do like Clark. Clark is a very smart fellow. Johnson made him Secretary of Defense, and I know Clark was in on some of these meetings that we had, he was always in as a matter of fact, because he was Secretary of Defense. The policy that Johnson had, it was presumed to be, and I think rightly so, that all of his people whom he had appointed, like Clark Clifford, Secretary of Defense, and everybody else, that they were really supporting that position. As a matter of fact, I think Clark was one of those that encouraged Johnson to keep putting in more troops and more planes and more battleships, because he was Secretary of Defense.

After Johnson said he wasn't going to run anymore than that administration got out, Clark wrote an editorial in *Life* magazine in which he said that all along he was opposed to the Vietnam war, and that he was one of those that tried to get Johnson out of it, long before Johnson did get out of it. I didn't think that was really correct. I didn't think that was really appropriate for Clark to say that, after he had accepted Johnson's invitation to become Secretary of Defense, and after he had served Johnson. He didn't retire from the secretaryship until Johnson gave up the presidency. I just didn't think that was the type of thing to do. Clark is a very able fellow and a very fine man, but I thought that was the one spot on his record that I certainly did not approve of. I think that he owed it to Johnson to support him, I think he should support him all the way through: Yes, I was a part of that, it may have been a mistake, but it was an honest mistake. We thought we could win, and God knows the military kept telling them they could win.

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I'll tell you another funny thing that happened when Johnson was president, that I will never forget as long as I live. One day we got a call to come over to the White House and see Johnson right away, an emergency call. When I say we I'm talking about we guys who were kind of running the Senate, Humphrey, Mansfield, me, [Dirksen](#) and so on. The question was: what should we do about the Dominican Republic? Trujillo had been assassinated, and a fellow was about to take over.

Ritchie: Juan Bosch?

Smathers: Juan Bosch had been in, but the president's name was [Joaquin] Balaguer. Balaguer had been Trujillo's secretary. So the contest was between those two. Today, of course, Balaguer is the president, and even to this late date, many years later, Bosch and Balaguer are still contesting with each other in the Dominican Republic. But the amusing thing that happened that day was that

Johnson was on the phone. Bosch was a left-wing guy. How left-wing he is, I don't really know, but he had the support of the Communist movement, and was credited with having that support. The more stable people were saying: We cannot have Bosch in here because it will be a Communist dictatorship.

There had been an uprising of the people and there was a lot of shooting back and forth. While we were in the Oval Office, Johnson got our ambassador to the Dominican Republic on the phone, and we could hear their conversation. We were sitting in the Oval Office across from the president's desk. The guy was saying: Mr. President, you have to send in troops, you've got to do something, because this is terrible. Then all of a sudden you would hear "bing," "zing," "zing." And Johnson said, "What the hell are those noises?" The guy said, "Mr. President, I am talking to you from under my desk. Those are bullets that are flying through this damn room." Johnson held the phone out and said, "Can you guys hear that?" We said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, we'll give you some help right." That's when it was decided, Johnson said, "I want to send in the Marines, and I want you guys to agree to it." We said, "Okay, fine." And we did. But here was the ambassador saying he was under the table, and we literally could hear over the telephone these sounds which he said were bullets, and I'm sure they were.

Now let's see, you asked me about Fulbright, was the last question. Fulbright's a great fellow. I see Fulbright a good deal today. We play golf together. He's a great friend of my brother's, he's always visiting my brother. My brother just thinks he's wonderful, and I do too.

Ritchie: One other member of that committee I wanted to ask your opinion on was Wayne Morse, who was chairman of the Latin American subcommittee at the time you were on the committee, and also was the chief opponent of Johnson's policies in Latin America and also in Vietnam.

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Smathers: Wayne Morse, there are guys who--you have seen in your life and I've seen them in mine--who never want to be with the majority. Wayne Morse in his life would have considered it a lost day if he had ever been on the majority side of anything. He was a minority stockholder, a minority representative, a minority spokesman, it doesn't make any difference what it's for, he just never wanted to be with the majority. He wanted to be different, and he was different. It didn't make any difference what the issue was, he would go out of his way to be different and argue about it. He would argue, and argue, and argue, and he's was a good arguer and an able fellow. I knew him just like we all knew him. I liked Wayne, you could not help but like him. He was always gentlemanly in what he had to say. He never seemed to carry that fighting difference which he would have with you on the floor of the Senate, he never carried that into his personal or private life as far as I knew. In fact, I don't know anybody who really disliked Wayne as a person. I knew of a lot of people who didn't like his politics, I being

one of them. But as an individual you couldn't help but like Wayne Morse. He could be a pretty charming fellow.

I wish I could think of them, but there were instances where Wayne would change his position just to be in opposition. If his original position was now winning, he'd change it, he'd now go and be on the other side. You know, he started out as a Republican and became a Democrat, and there were days when I thought he was probably going to shift back. He had been a law school professor, and he was a professorial type. His people admired him for his willingness to stand up and oppose overwhelming odds. Many times there was a vote, there would be a hundred senators with ninety-six voting one way and two absent and the other two voting against it would be Wayne Morse and one other fellow. He liked that position. That was his whole style. He would go back out to Oregon, and he would tell the people: "I'm not going to let these people push me around. I'm going to fight for my own positions, and your position," and he would. But that was his thing, that was his bag. He followed that consistently. He was consistently in opposition.

Ritchie: Were you able to work with him on Latin American issues?

Smathers: Frankly, you tell me that, but I don't remember him doing much about Latin America at all. I don't even remember Wayne ever going down there. Now, I could be terribly off base having said that, but I remember Magnuson having a lot of concern about Latin America, but I don't remember Wayne Morse. See I was not on the Foreign Relations Committee at the time that I was big in Latin America. When I was big in Latin America I was still on the Commerce Committee and Magnuson had let me become chairman of the Latin America Subcommittee of the Commerce Committee. As a matter of fact, at my suggestion, Magnuson created that committee, just for me.

Magnuson and I were very good friends, very close friends. I loved him. I mean, some guys you like and some guys you love. Magnuson was a fellow that you just had to love. He was a wonderful, sweet, thoughtful, able fellow. He used to come to Miami and visit me a lot. I've taken him fishing a lot, played

a lot of cards with him. He was a sweet, wonderful guy. But he let me have that Latin American subcommittee on Commerce, which meant all kinds of trade. Most everything on Commerce, I'm the guy that introduced the bill which created the American Development Bank, I'm the fellow that handled all the sugar quota stuff for Latin American countries. But I don't remember Wayne really doing a lot of it. I'm sure Wayne went to the big Latin American conventions when they had them. In any event, we were not in opposition, we were on the same side, at least with respect to Latin America. But until you told me, I'd forgotten that Wayne

Morse was chairman of the subcommittee on Latin America of the Foreign Relations Committee.

The Foreign Relations Committee really didn't do much. They never had any legislation to amount to anything.

Ritchie: Except for foreign aid, I guess.

Smathers: The foreign aid bill, that was it. One bill.

Ritchie: One striking difference between the committees back in the '50s and '60s and the committees now is they had much smaller staff in those days. How did the staff support system work? Did the staff work mostly for the chairman of the committee?

Smathers: Mostly.

Ritchie: Or could you as a senator get any help from them?

Smathers: As I understand it, the staff today is about three or four times larger than it was back in the '60s, which meant that staff then pretty much worked directly under the chairman of the committee. While I had a subcommittee chairmanship, like at the Commerce Committee, when Magnuson was chairman and he made me chairman of the Latin American Subcommittee on Commerce, I was able to borrow a staff member from time to time, maybe two. And if I went on a trip maybe I took the guy. I took a fellow named Frank, I wish I could think of his name, nice guy, south to Latin America with me one time, on one of those trips. But he really worked for the full committee. Today, with this enormous staff that they have, every subcommittee has about four or five staff members, which we didn't have. But we got along fine. I mean, I didn't feel as though I was being discriminated against or shortchanged in any way. As a matter of fact, I felt like I was pretty damn lucky to be able to get some of these people to go with me and work up a report for me, which they did.

I'm not here to say that today they're overstaffed, I don't know. But I know this, that we got along rather well in the late '40s, and '50s, and '60s, during the time I was there all through the '60s, and we didn't have all that big staff. We got along fine. Sure, the population is bigger today than it was, but not that much bigger. I think they've overdone that today. I think the Congress has

gotten too expensive. I think democracy is a great thing, but I think you can have too much democracy in an organization. I think in an organization there has got to be the leaders. The leaders have to lead. And the leaders can't lead because

their leadership is so fragmented and so divided. It's hard for them to get a consensus over there today, and that's why they're so slow in passing legislation.

You take two or three subcommittee chairmen of the Appropriations Committee, well, the chairman of the Appropriations Committee himself he gets so that he's a figurehead, because all the subcommittee chairmen are doing all the work and making all the speeches. They're the ones that are delving into matters a little more deeply than previously had been done. Each subcommittee chairman is arrogating unto himself more power every time he can, to get publicity, because they all live off publicity. By the time they get through, the chairman of the committee is sort of here as a figurehead where all the subcommittee chairmen are getting all the attention. The only guy that seems to be beating that is [John Dingell](#), who's the chairman of the Commerce Committee in the House. He keeps all his subcommittee chairmen pretty well beat down. He doesn't let them get way ahead of him, he's running it.

Now, I don't think that's true so much in the Senate. Maybe Bob Byrd will do that now that he's chairman of the Appropriations Committee, he will insist that whatever it is, if he's got the military versus the procurement program, why he's going to make it come back through him more directly. I don't know, but that's the way it used to be. Consequently, it was easier to run the Senate and run the House because you knew who the leadership was. And the leadership pretty much could deliver what they said they were going to do. Today, who knows? I don't think that's good. There's just too much democracy over there today.

Ritchie: Was that the way the Finance Committee worked? The senior members made the decisions and the rest followed?

Smathers: Pretty much. When Bob Kerr was chairman, the short time he was chairman, it was definitely true. Russell Long no, but Harry Byrd and who was chairman before Byrd?

Ritchie: [Walter George](#).

Smathers: Pretty much. The chairman was such a powerful fellow that he pretty much dictated. And we didn't have any subcommittees to amount to anything. Very few subcommittees. That's the way, if I were chairman of the Finance and Taxation Committee today, I wouldn't have any subcommittees if I could avoid it, to start with. I'm sure that's what Walter George did. Nothing occurred that he didn't know about. And we had a Republican when they were in power.

Ritchie: Was [Eugene Millikin](#) chairman?

Smathers: Yes, Millikin was very good. He didn't let a lot of subcommittees. I remember I tried to get Harry Byrd to create a trade subcommittee, I figured I was about three from the top, and he'd let me be chairman of that. He wouldn't do it. No, said the whole committee will listen to all that. So I was unable to go out and get a lot of publicity to go tearing off on some trade program. But that's the way it used to be, as distinguished from the way it is today, where there are subcommittee chairmen who are as powerful or more powerful than the committee chairmen.

Ritchie: At the time when there wasn't much staff support, did that give an advantage to lobbyists in the sense that they could provide information and support for the senators on specific bills?

Smathers: Well, I would say this: lobbyists always were around, and good lobbyists always provided you with their side of whatever the argument was. I think that they were very helpful. We got much better understanding by virtue of the fact that a lobbyist would say, "Can I submit to you this piece of paper, it's our position?" Yeah, sure, I'd like it, because I can't get it all from just having one hearing, where one guy comes on at ten o'clock in the morning and talks, and in the meantime there are fourteen roll call votes where you have to get up and vote, back and forth, and then you recess for lunch at twelve thirty. You really don't get much from those witnesses who come and testify verbally in front of the committee, because there are too many different questions and you don't have an opportunity to get into it in any depth.

All the time I was over there, and I'm sure it was the case then and the case today, that a senator and a chairman of a committee, he doesn't mind at all having the protagonists present him with their arguments as to why they think they're right. That's a shortcut to having to go out and find out yourself. So you'd just as soon they'd do it. Now, you know that one guy's for something; these are all the for guys, and over here these are the fellows who are against it. You read that for a little while and you say, what's this answer? And it goes back and forth. Your staff has the benefit of that, and your staff takes all of that and redigests it, and rewrites it, and says here are the pros and here are the cons, and gives it to the senator.

I think lobbyists are an essential part of this legislative process. I don't think you could get along without them, because the senators and congressmen themselves do not have the time to go into these very, very difficult and far-reaching matters, to the extent that the lobbyists do, because that's their sole concern, that's their sole issue. They present you with something that they had probably twenty-five people working on that one paper that one guy gives to you. So you get the best of their arguments, but you get of both the pros and the cons, and then your own staff looks at that, and they pass judgment on the pros and cons of that and give you their views. Then you can ask, well, let me see the originals. What did the U.S. Chamber of Commerce really say about this? Let me see that. What did the

shopping group who opposed this, what did the consumer groups say about this. You know, you would ask those questions

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because if you had to cast a vote you wanted to cast as intelligent a vote as was possible to do, and you needed to get as many facts as you could both for and against so you could make up your mind intelligently.

Ritchie: When you were on the Finance Committee, who did you find to be the most effective lobbyists?

Smathers: Well, that's a hard question to answer, because I don't remember who was the most effective lobbyist. I would guess that the National Association of Manufacturers group, they had some top-quality people. I'll tell you an interesting fact, when I was in the Senate, and on the Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee, and chairman of the Aviation Subcommittee, I remember coming in the morning to the office from my home, about eight thirty, and I had a secretary named Juanita Thomas, who was a wonderful girl, who had been in the navy herself, smart as hell. She had a list for me of the people who wanted to see me before I went to my committee meeting at ten o'clock, this was now nine o'clock, so here's a list of people that there's no way I can see fifteen of these people in the next hour. So I'm looking over the list and I suddenly see the name on there of [Scott Lucas](#), former United States senator from Illinois, former majority leader of the Senate who got defeated. I said, "Well, Juanita, here's Scott Lucas, now you call him and tell him I'll see him in the next fifteen or twenty minutes." And here's another guy I know, and so and so, I'd see them.

This is why guys who have been in there, who have been part of it, they're far and away the best lobbyists, because they are fellows who can get your attention. I look at Scott Lucas, I think: there's a guy who's been defeated, he's been majority leader and everything, there but for the grace of God go I someday. Sure, I'm going to see him. He's going to be able to come and present to me his problems. I'm not going to say no. Because in ten years I may be trying to do the same thing. So, to the extent that a former member of Congress comes to see you, he's got to be the most effective lobbyist. Next, I would say it's the fellows you know. If he was in the administration before and let's say assistant secretary of Commerce and you knew him, you'd see him. He's now representing the National Bankers Association. Okay, it doesn't make any difference what he's representing. He wants to see me, and he was part of the government, and I know him, and I know he knows his way around. Sure, let me see what he's got to say. Now, some guy named Timbuktu, you never heard of, who in the hell is this guy? He represents so and so. Oh, well, put him off, I can't see him.

So there is a lot to be said for the concern they have about former members of the government lobbying the government, because they do have a better in, there's

no question about it. That's why I think that it's a sensible thing that we've now got rules that won't let them lobby back on something where they were on the committee and they now are representing the other side. They have to wait a certain period of time, I think that's a healthy thing. They still have an advantage, however. Now, once you get to know a guy real well, if you know

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the Ralph Nader's of the world, if Ralph Nader wants to come to see you, you know he's a pretty sound, logical guy. He knows the Congress so well that he's not going to take twenty minutes when he can get his job done in five minutes. And time is so precious over there. You just don't have time to sit and chat with anybody.

So you say who's the most effective lobbyists? It would depend upon that individual, how well you knew him, what you thought of him. We all shied away from the bankers. We all shied away from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, we shied away from those things because normally they didn't get you a lot of votes. Labor unions in certain states, they could get in to see anybody. They weren't as important in Florida as they were in other states, but when the head of the AFL-CIO from the state of Florida wanted to see me, why sure I'd see him. Head of the Citrus Commission wanted to see you, yeah, I'll see him. Citrus was big in Florida. It goes along that line, so it's hard to say who is the most effective.

Ritchie: You were in the enviable position in 1956 of not having a Republican opponent or not having any campaign expenditures, but in those days, was there a stronger connection between the lobbyists and campaign contributions?

Smathers: No, it wasn't near as strong as it is today. See, we didn't have PACs in those days, Political Action Committees. Your money always came, really, from individuals. I would venture to say that ninety percent of the campaign contributions which I had in 1950 were individuals. In '56 when I didn't really have any opposition I don't know whether I went out and raised a lot of money. In fact, I didn't. I didn't have to. But it was mostly individuals. We didn't have a system in Florida, which I'm glad, where you had to get the United Mine Workers, because we didn't have any organizations of that character. We had the Right-to-Work law in Florida, which Labor had fought against. When I was a member of Congress, we had the Hartley bill, which was one of the bills which tried to restrict the Right-to-Work law. I voted wrong as far as labor was concerned, because I voted for the open shop, which meant that you did not have to join a union in order to get a job. They were the only ones that were organized, the labor organizations, in my state. The citrus people, as a group they wouldn't give you any money, but you could go to them individually and they'd help you. In Florida, it has not ever yet been a big organization state, in terms of support or in terms of financial help.

Ritchie: I wondered about the year 1956 when you were chairman of the Democratic Campaign Committee?

Smathers: Well, Johnson made me that. I went around and raised money. I went to all the organization but not any of them in Florida to amount to anything. I don't think we got any money from Florida. I went to the usual things that Johnson told me to go to, that had been historically Democratic. I went to the Automobile Workers Union, the United Mine Workers, the Teachers

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associations and those sort of things that were well organized. We'd go and I'd ask for money for the Democrats, because we'd give it to all kinds of Democrats. It was Democrat versus Republican rather than individuals. We collected all this money, and then Johnson would send me out to give some to [Howard Cannon](#), I remember going to Nevada to take him some money. I remember he sent me to North Dakota, the boy's still in the Senate.

Ritchie: Oh, [Quentin Burdick](#).

Smathers: Burdick. Took Burdick some money. But Johnson would say, "George, how much have you got collected?" I'd say, "Well, we've got now a hundred thousand, hundred and fifty thousand dollars." He'd say, "Well I want some to go here, some to go here, some to go here." He was pretty much the boss. We'd argue with him from time to time. I'd say, "Look, we've got help some of these southerners." He'd say, "Oh, those Democrats, they're going to win anyway, we don't have to give them any money. We're just going to give money where we can keep a Republican from coming in." But that was the way it went.

Ritchie: Some of the recent studies of Johnson say that one of his successes was his ability to tap into oil money for campaign contributions.

Smathers: Oh, he got the oil people, no question about it. Johnson got all the oil people. I don't know how much they gave the Republican party, I'm sure that they did, but Johnson got more. I'll guarantee you he got more than the Republicans ever got, because they were afraid not to give to Johnson. Johnson was a terror. He was the strongest individual in this whole town of Washington for ten or fifteen years. There just wasn't anybody who could compare to Lyndon Johnson in terms of sheer power, and it came from the fact that he was smart, shrewd, and never stopped working. Never stopped working. Had no play habits, none, never liked to play golf, didn't play gin rummy, didn't chase women, nothing. Johnson really ran things.

Ritchie: But he was able to get oil money into the Democratic campaign funds?

Smathers: Oh sure. He'd just call them up. Johnson would call them up and tell them. "I know you guys, I know you well." Bob Kerr of course knew them. Johnson would go to the Cattlemen's Association, oh my God he got money from them. He got money from all of them.

Ritchie: I've heard stories about envelopes being handed out in the Senate with the campaign contributions inside.

Smathers: That's right. It would be almost like that. Johnson did not let me make the decision as to who was going to get the money. Now, I would have some input, but Johnson was damn sure that he approved, and most of the time he told me where he thought it ought to go. There was nobody else that

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made that decision but Johnson. The next guy was me, and I would go out to get the money. He sent me around the country picking up the money, I'd get the money and bring it back and keep it, but Johnson was the guy who passed it out.

Ritchie: And I suppose they knew that it came from Johnson too.

Smathers: He would never let you do it any other way. He wanted them to damn well know, because if they came to the Senate he expected them to get right in line with him and vote his program, just like he wanted. That's why he wanted to do it that way. He wanted to be able to say, "Look, I did a lot in helping you get elected, now you get in line and be on my team."

Ritchie: Along those lines, do you think that the current campaign financing laws get in the way of party discipline and leadership?

Smathers: I tell you what, I think that the campaign laws need to be changed very drastically. I think the political action committees, the PACs, have become a disgrace. I keep wondering what the solution is, because campaign financing is difficult and it's expensive. But what makes it expensive? It's because of the other side. If the other side was not spending five hundred thousand dollars, then you're side wouldn't have to spend five hundred thousand dollars. If the other side would agree only to spend one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, then you could say to your man, "Now look, we've got you on an even plateau. You've got to fight it out here on issues. We're only going to spend a hundred and fifty thousand, and you're only going to spend a hundred and fifty thousand." Now you have to worry about being absolutely obliterated in terms of getting your message out, because your opponent is on the television every night at prime time for two or three minutes for five weeks, and you're not on at all. The guy who's on the television is going to win, obviously, because he's the one who's getting to the people.

The money has gotten too big, the PACs have gotten too important, and you have to say, what is the solution? It costs money when you look at an add in a daily newspaper, like the Miami *Herald* for example. If you wanted to have a whole ad on one sheet of paper it would cost you forty-five hundred dollars--it used to be, today it probably costs seventy-five hundred, I don't know. But if you had a half a page, it would cost you more than half of that, and if you quarter page it would cost you more than a quarter, because it got more expensive the less you used. Well, to run these ads and to get on television, it's really expensive. It costs you five thousand dollars for one minute. So the fellow says, "I can't win if the other fellow's doing it." It's a kind of a contest that feeds itself in its grossness, because one fellow spends a million dollars and then the other fellow feels like he's got to spend a million if he can get it.

There's got to be a limit. There's got to be several types of limits in these campaign contributions, and one of the limits that I think we ought to start with is a limit that would say if I'm running in Florida, only Floridians can

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contribute to my campaign. Why should the United Automobile Workers in Detroit be financing my campaign, so that I would be voting more because of the Detroit influence than I would be because of Florida's interests? Why should the Cattlemen's Association of Oklahoma be contributing to a New York senator's campaign. Why don't we limit it to a state? New York, [Mario] Cuomo, he only raises money in New York, and the people he runs against, they only raise money in New York. They don't come down here to Washington and get the Republican Committee or the Democratic Committee which has raised money from all over because what happens is that then you make all these senators and all these congressmen forget their own states and their own congressional districts.

They become more concerned with this national picture. They're all involved in nationwide problems rather than problems of their own state, and the problems of their own congressional district. That's not to say they aren't concerned with them, but they become more concerned with other things, because if all of their money came from the United Automobile Workers in Detroit, and this guy's running in north Florida and he's getting a big hunk of dough, he's thinking: Well, I don't have many automobile workers down here, so I'm going to vote with the United Automobile Workers' program up there. It distorts what was the intention of the founding fathers to have representative government, meaning that each man who went to Washington was representing the thinking of the people in his community where he came from. If he came from the state of Florida, he represented Florida. If he came from Oklahoma, he represented Oklahoma. If he came from New York or wherever.

One of the best ways to do that is to not let them contribute. Then you get a true picture of how strong the guy is in home state. He's not getting elected in New

Jersey because of money that came from Los Vegas, came from the United Mine Workers in West Virginia, came from the Detroit automobile people, he's getting elected from the people of the farming communities of New Jersey, and the gambling people in New Jersey, or whatever, but it's New Jersey people. If they'd put that law in, I think that would go a long ways toward settling the politicians down. The politicians wouldn't object to much, very frankly, because they're all operating from a level playing field, so to speak. They're operating from within their state. They're running in their state. That's where all the players ought to get their money. That's the first thing I would do if I were president. I would eliminate the power of these big political action committees, whether it's the United States Chamber of Commerce, or whether it's the National Automobile Dealers, or whether it's the Manufacturers' Association, they wouldn't have any influence except as they went through their states. Then you'd have a lot more representative government.

Then I would stop this business where you can accumulate money. When you retire you take all that money with you. That's not right, and I think the Congress has already recognized that it's not right by not letting people do that who were elected after 1980. So they'll eliminate that, and that should be eliminated. I think that there's got to be a limit on how much is going to be

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spent on advertisement. We need to take politics and put it back maybe fifty years, so they do what I had to do when I first ran. You had to go out on the corner and meet with people. You just didn't go to the television studio and make two or three broadcasts and have your face all powdered up, and have a television prompter that you're reading off of, and have music and a staged thing.

I think you need to put the politicians back out on the street, where they have to shake hands with the people and come in direct contact with them, whenever they run. The only way to do that is to limit how much money they can spend on television. If they have a limit on that, why then they're going to do the other thing. They're going to get out of the television studio and go back out on the street corner. [Lawton Chiles](#), he got elected wonderfully, he walked the state of Florida. It was a fantastic thing that guy did. It was wonderful. He waved at the people. He didn't shake hands with all of them.

I know this, when I ran in 1950 and a couple of times after, I would get calluses on my hands from shaking hands with people so much. Shaking hands, shaking hands, finally you get calluses here. You press the flesh, you got to know the people. You had a feel of the people. You just weren't in the hands of some advertising agency. So I think that there's much needs to be done in that area. Much, much. Limit what they could spend.

I don't know that I would ever be just for government financing. I don't think that's particularly healthy either. I think that if a fellow's going to run for office, and he's going to run in a state like Maryland, he's got to have some following. He's got to go around to every county, to every community in the state of Maryland first to see whether he's got any support. If the local Chambers of Commerce, and the people at the local unions say yeah, we don't like the guy that's in there, we'll support you, okay, that's when he decides he's going to run. But if he says: if I can get this advertising agency, and I'm going to get all my money out of New York and out of Detroit, I don't ever have to go to see anybody because I'm going to sit here and have the best television ads and the best radio ads that are on, and I'm going to win, just by that. That's a frustration of the democratic ideal, as far as I'm concerned. I'm against that. I think that ought to change.

Well, doctor. Okay, you think I've burnt your ear enough today?

Ritchie: I think this has been very interesting.

Smathers: Well, I appreciate the chance to visit with you, and get to talk to you, I really do. It's a source of happiness for me.

Ritchie: Well, it's a great source of information for us. When people come to visit the Senate they sit in the galleries and they expect to see debates on the floor, and they don't. The activities are off in the committee rooms, the part that's probably the least understood by the public.

Smathers: That is one of the biggest disappointments of all the visitors. They get up in the Senate gallery and they think, boy, now I'm going to hear a great debate, between two great senators. And they go there and there's a guy making a speech, he's the only fellow there. The presiding officer is scratching his head up there, he's half asleep, and pages are walking in and out. That's it. And he thinks: what in the world is this? Well, the fact is the work is being done in the committees. That's where all the senators are. Until there's a roll call you don't ever get to see them. Then they come in and turn around and go back out.

I don't know what you could do about having better debates on the Senate floor. But if you hang around and look for them, you finally get some pretty good debates on the Senate floor. These fellows are all professional speakers in a way, but they're not professional listeners. They don't like to listen to anybody else. That guy's against what I'm for, that's all he wants to hear. The bottom line is he going to vote with me or oppose me. I don't want to hear why he's going to vote against me. He's going to vote against me, well, I'm not going to waste anymore time with him. That's the attitude. I've got to get somebody who has not made up

his mind that maybe I can convince, so to hell with the fellow who's already made up his mind, we know how he's going to vote.

But if they go to committees they really see what's happening. And I do think television has been helpful in that respect. I'm for televising the hearings, I think that's very healthy. I think that gives the public a participatory feeling that they otherwise wouldn't have. I think it's well that they see how the Congress and the Senate works, and that's how they work, in those committees. When they're approving somebody or disapproving somebody for the Supreme Court, the public can see how it's really happening. That's infinitely more beneficial to everybody than it is to go listen to them making a set speech on the Senate floor. So I'm for that.

But I could talk for an hour on campaign financing. It's gotten so gross. We need a clean, big new broom and sweep that whole system out and go back to the basics. If you're from Kentucky, you're going to raise your money from Kentucky. You're going to be a Kentucky senator. You're not going to owe a damn thing to the National Automobile Association. You're not going to owe anything to the oil people in Texas. You're only going to owe your allegiance to the folks who elected you from Kentucky. That's the way it ought to be. Florida the same way.

Ritchie: Well, thank you senator, and I'll look forward to coming back and continuing.

Smathers: All right.

[End of interview #5]